

Report says ICE agents rarely target criminals; Phoenix area even worse

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Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents cited "criminal activity" in deportation proceedings in just 2.8 percent of the nearly 270,000 cases filed in immigration court so far this year, according to research done by Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse or TRAC Immigration project.

That appears to contradict testimony that the ICE acting director made to Congress last week.

"Approximately 90 percent of ERO's administrative arrests in the interior of the country are of aliens that have prior criminal convictions, face pending criminal charges, are immigration fugitives or have been previously removed from the country and have illegally reentered," said Matthew Albence, who made a testimony to Congress about the need for more funding for ICE and updates to immigration laws.

"The people who are in positions of power in ICE and in government now are trying to spin that the people who are being detained all have these tremendous criminal records. The reality we see on a daily basis is that's just not true," said Ray Ybarra Maldonado, an immigration attorney.

According to TRAC Immigration, the numbers here in the Phoenix area are even worse than the national numbers. The criminal activity of immigrants is cited in only 0.5 percent of the cases filed in the Phoenix immigration court. That amounts to 18 cases so far this year.

"What we see is gardeners, construction workers, cooks -- people who are just trying to make a living for themselves and their families," said Maldonado.

According to a study released last year by the libertarian CATO Institute, tens of thousands of US citizens may have also been targeted by ICE over a 12-year period. CATO researchers used public records from Texas to show how many times ICE agents issued orders to detain people who were arrested by local police. In some of those instances, the arrestees insisted that they were US citizens and ended up being released.

There is no solid figure for how often US citizens are the subject of detainer orders here in Arizona, but between 2002 and 2015, ICE issued 97,000 detainers for Arizona jail inmates. Of those, agents actually took 65,000 into custody and allowed 32,000 to be released. Some of those 32,000 were likely citizens.

CBS 5 Investigates reached out to the ICE public affairs office in Washington for a reaction to this story and specific numbers of US citizens who have been detained by ICE agents. As of Tuesday night, ICE has not responded.